

French *il y a* clefts and existentials

information structural parallels

Lena Karssenberg
KU Leuven (Belgium)

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Introduction

Il y a clefts

- 'Presentational' / 'thetic' / 'all-focus'

(1) A:- What's happening?
B:- *(il) y a Jean qu'a téléphoné*
(EXPL) there has Jean who.has called
'*Jean called.*' (Lambrecht 1988:136)

- Clefted element *Jean* + cleft relative clause = **discourse-new**
- Typical of spoken French
- See Lambrecht 1988; Léard 1992 and elements in Lambrecht 1986/1994/2001; Ashby 1999; Cappeau & Deulofeu 2001; Choi-Jonin & Lagae 2005; Willems & Meullemann 2010; Cruschina 2012; Giry-Schneider 1988

Il y a existentials

- = all sentences introduced by *il y a* 'there is/are' that express existence or location of a referent (cf. Bentley's 2014 'there-sentences')
- Information structure: 'all-focus'
- Two types of existentials: 'regular' (2) and 'list-reading' (3)

(2) *Il y a un retour à la culture.* (Ashby 1999:490)
There is a return to culture.

(3) A: - *How many people know about this?*
B: - *There's me and there's you. That's all.*
(Rando and Napoli 1978:308)

- See e.g. Leonetti 2008/to appear; Villalba 2013/to appear; Cruschina 2012, 2014; Bentley 2014; Abbott 1993; Rando & Napoli 1978; Ward & Birner 1995; Francez 2007; Hartmann 2006/2008; Breivik & Martínez-Insua 2008; Beaver, Francez & Levinson 2005



The “Focus Marking hypothesis”

“Clefts serve to **mark as focus** an argument that might otherwise be construed as **nonfocal** (...).”

(Lambrecht 2001:489)

Clefts + existentials “enable a **non-topic** interpretation of the subject” (Erteschik-Shir 2007:119)

[See also Lambrecht 1988/1994; É.Kiss 2002; Leonetti to appear, Erteschik-Shir 1997; Cruschina 2014; Breivik & Martínez-Insua 2008)

- BUT: hypothesis **discredited** wrt c’est / it clefts (e.g. Dufter 2006/2008/2009; Prince 1978): clefted element often **not a focus but a topic**
- What about existentials and *il y a* clefts? Do they always introduce a **focus** or can they **introduce topics as well**?

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This presentation

1. *Il y a* clefts: three articulations

all-focus

focus-background

contrastive topic-comment

2. Existentials: three types

regular

list reading

contrastive topic(?)

3. Implications for the Focus Marking Hypothesis

4. Conclusion

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Il y a clefts – three different information structure articulations

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Used corpora

1. *Le Monde* 1998

- Journalistic texts: **formal written** French
- 25.7 million words

2. *Yahoo Questions and Answers* 2006-2009

- Internet discussion forum: **informal written** French
- French part: 6.1 million words
- (20.000 questions, 140.000 answers)

3. *Discours sur la Ville / CFPP* 2000

- Transcriptions of **spoken** interviews
- 550.000 words (38,9 hours)

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Corpus data: frequency

	Le Monde (formal written)	Yahoo (informal written)	CFPP2000 (spoken)
<i>il y a</i> cleft occurrences	71	262	235
Word count in corpus	27 million	6.1 million	550.000
Frequency (occurrences/words in corpus)	2,63 / million	43,61 / million	427,27 / million

- il y a* clefts indeed much more frequent in spoken corpus
- Total of **568** *il y a* clefts in the three corpora
- + **233** *il n'y a que x qui* 'there is only' clefts
(quantitative analysis of information structure ongoing)

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Type 1: all-focus *il y a* clefts

- (4) *tu connais l'histoire de Paf le chien? non?!? ben c'est un chien qui traverse la rue. y'a une voiture qui passe et..... Paf le chien!*
'Do you know the story about Bam the dog? no?!? well it's a dog that crosses the street. **A car passes by** and.... Bam! the dog!'
(Yahoo 1397)

- Neither 'a car' nor the fact that it passes by are discourse-given: the whole event is new in the discourse (= sentence-focus)
- ≠ topic-comment: **the sentence is not about a car:**

[in the same context]

Je dis à propos d'une voiture qu'elle passe.

'I say about a car that it passes by.'

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Type 2: focus-background *il y a* clefts

- (5) A: *Je recherche des modèles de voiture à acheter neuve moins de 10 000 euros, ou aller!?*
B: *bonjours. il y a la citroen c1 qui est a moins de 10 000 euros.*
A: 'I'm looking for new car models that cost less than €10.000, where should I go?'
B: 'Hello. **There's the Citroën C1 that costs less than €10.000.**'
(Yahoo 1307)

- Cleft relative clause = **discourse-given, backgrounded + variable**
- Clefted element *la Citroën c1* = new information **focus + value**
(= argument focus)

On English focus-background there clefts:

Davidse 1999/2000/2014; Collins 1992; Piotrowski 2009

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Type 2: focus-background *il y a* clefts

- Specificational** cleft: the clefted element specifies the value for a given variable
- (5) There's **the Citroën C1** that costs less than €10.000.
value variable
- Not the purpose of this sentence to give a comment about *Citroën C1*:
A: 'I'm looking for cars that cost less than €10.000.
B: # **As for the Citroën C1, it costs less than €10.000.**'
 - But rather:
variable = topic
B: As for **cars that cost less than €10.000,**
the Citroën C1 belongs to that category.
value = focus

Cf. Lambrecht 1988/2001; Furukawa 1996; Hedberg 2013

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Type 3: contrastive topic-comment // y a clefts

- (6) [Salman Rushdy and the author of the article are walking down the street. A man in the street recognizes Salman and says something encouraging to them.]

Et Salman: "Je suis content que vous voyez ça... Il y a l'establishment qui me déteste. Il y a tous ces salopards qui pensent que je me suis fait de la pub avec la fatwa. Mais il y a le peuple qui, lui, a toujours été formidable avec moi."

'And Salman says: "I'm happy that you see that... There's the establishment that hates me. There's all those assholes who think I just made publicity with the fatwa. But there's the people who, them, have always been great to me.'

(Le Monde 119)

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Type 3: contrastive topic-comment // y a clefts

- (6) *Et Salman: "Je suis content que vous voyez ça... Il y a l'establishment qui me déteste. Il y a tous ces salopards qui pensent que je me suis fait de la pub avec la fatwa. Mais il y a le peuple qui, lui, a toujours été formidable avec moi."*

'And Salman says: "I'm happy that you see that... There's the establishment that hates me. There's all those assholes who think I just made publicity with the fatwa. But there's the people who, them, have always been great to me.'

(Le Monde 119)

- Clefted element *the people* = contrastive **topic**
 - **contrasted** with *the establishment* + *all those assholes*
- Relative clause *have always been...* = contrastive **focus/comment**
 - **contrasted** with *that hates me* + *think I made publicity...*

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Type 3: contrastive topic-comment // y a clefts

- 'The people' = what the sentence is **about** (as for topic test):

Mais quant au peuple, lui a toujours été formidable avec moi.
'But as for the people, they have always been great to me.'

contrastive comment

- Contrastive topics have topic and focus features at the same time e.g. Erteschik-Shir (2007:49):

(7) A: Tell me about your brothers John and Bill.
B: JOHN is the smart one.
= {John_{foc}, Bill}_{top}

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'But as for the people, they have always been great to me.'

contrastive comment

[+FOCUS]
[+ TOPIC]

[+FOCUS]

- Contrastive topics have topic and focus features at the same time e.g. Erteschik-Shir (2007:49):

(7) A: Tell me about your brothers John and Bill.
B: JOHN is the smart one.
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- Subtype of **double focus** cleft (Dufter 2008; Huber 2002; Büring 2014)

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// n'y a que + aboutness topic

- (8) Mari: Euh... Ensuite on a été dans un bar à strip-tease, mais j'ai QUE regardé, c'était chiant, ouais et
 Femme: C'est bon, Superman. Tu as seulement regardé, et tu as tranquillement attendu... Que dois-je encore croire, Superman?
 Mari: Laisse-moi s'il te plait parler et écoute!
 D'ailleurs pourquoi m'appelles-tu tout le temps Superman?
 Femme: Parce qu'il n'y a que Superman qui porte le slip par-dessus le pantalon!
 'Husband: Uh.. Then we went to a striptease bar, but I ONLY watched, it was terrible, yeah and...
 Wife: Alright, Superman. You only watched, and you quietly waited... Do you expect me to believe that, Superman?
 Husband: Please just let me talk and listen! By the way, why do you keep calling me Superman?
 Wife: Because only Superman wears his underwear over his pants!'
 (Yahoo 75)

'only Superman' = topic with [+FOCUS]

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Which IS articulations can // y a clefts express?

Articulation		il y a... qui	il n'y a que .. qui
ALL-FOCUS		74% (n= 421)	not found
FOCUS	BACKGROUND	24% (n=134)	many tokens
TOPIC	COMMENT	1% (n=6)	a few tokens
Ambiguous		1% (n=7)	many tokens

↓
(Analysis ongoing)

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Is the clefted element always a focus, as predicted by the Focus Marking Hypothesis?

- Surprise: in a few cases, the clefted element is a **topic**
- However: in all these cases, the topic bears a **focus-feature** (contrastive topic OR topic modified by exclusive particle *ne... que* 'only')

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// y a existentials –
 regular existentials
 list-reading existentials
 contrastive topics?

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Regular existentials ~ all-focus *il y a* clefts

- Parallelism between all-focus *il y a* clefts and *il y a* existentials already noted (De Cat 2007; Léard 1992)
- Out-of-the-blue all-focus sentences, regardless of syntactic properties (cleft, existential...): predicated of an (implicit) **stage topic** (Cf. Francez 2007; Erteschik-Shir 1997/2007; Leonetti to appear...)

Existential:

- (9) stage topic [Il y a un chien **dans le jardin**]_{FOCUS}
'There's a dog in the garden.'

Cleft:

- (10) stage topic [Il y a un chien **qui aboie**]_{FOCUS}
'A dog is barking.'

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List-reading existentials ~ focus-background *il y a* clefts

- Hartmann (2006): list-reading existential = **specificational** sentence

(11)

A: *Whom shall we invite to our party?* (Hartmann 2006:8)

'Qui pourrions-nous inviter à notre fête?'

B: Well, *there's John, Mary and David*

'Eh ben *y'a John, Mary et David*

value = focus

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List-reading existentials ~ focus-background *il y a* clefts

- Hartmann (2006): list-reading existential = **specificational** sentence

(11)

A: *Whom shall we invite to our party?* (Hartmann 2006:8)

'Qui pourrions-nous inviter à notre fête?'

B: Well, *there's John, Mary and David that we could invite*

'Eh ben *y'a John, Mary et David qu'on pourrait inviter.*'

value = focus

variable = topic

- Difference focus-background *il y a* cleft vs. list-reading existential:
repetition of the variable/topic

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Existential + topic?

Big question: *can existentials introduce topic constituents as well?*

Bentley (2014): "No" (Cf. also Abbott 1993)

- (12) a. *E-li andé i sugaman?* (Bentley 2013:686)

'Where are the towels?'

b. # *L'é i sugaman te la casèla.*

'There are the towels in the drawer.'

c. *I sugaman i é te la casèla.*

'The towels are in the drawer.'

- (13) – A: What about Klaus? / Tell me about Klaus.

– B: # *Il y a Klaus qui...*

'There's Klaus who...'

However...

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- (14) Y'a toi qui fête la chandeleur normalement,
puis y'a eux...
 'There's you who celebrates Candlemas in a normal way,
 then there's them...



Julien - - - @its_julien · 2 Feb 2013
 Y'a toi qui fête la chandeleur normalement, puis y'a eux...

- **Contrast** between *toi* 'you' and *eux* 'them'
- *Eux* 'them' present in discourse
- Salient feature that makes "them" different from "you" = *linguistically* absent but *contextually* / *visually* accessible

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https://twitter.com/its_julien/status/297786702183923713

Existentials + contrastive topic?

- (15) Eastham was the first person he was totally honest with -- no one in his life knew about the drinking. He expected sympathy. But she wasn't having it. She said there were people struggling for their lives and then there's you --- you have all these opportunities and you're throwing it all away.
 (www.edition.cnn.com/2014/04/28/health/irpt-weight-loss-brian-flemming/)

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Existentials + contrastive topic?

- (15) Eastham was the first person he was totally honest with -- no one in his life knew about the drinking. He expected sympathy. But she wasn't having it. She said there were people struggling for their lives and then there's you --- you have all these opportunities and you're throwing it all away.
 (www.edition.cnn.com/2014/04/28/health/irpt-weight-loss-brian-flemming/)
- (14) 'There's you who celebrates Candlemas in a normal way, then there's them... [picture]
- (6) There's the establishment that hates me. (...) But there's the people who, them, have always been great to me.
- In common: establish in the discourse: oppositional **pair of referents** + oppositional properties

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Existentials + contrastive topic?

- (15) Eastham was the first person he was totally honest with -- no one in his life knew about the drinking. He expected sympathy. But she wasn't having it. She said there were people struggling for their lives and then there's you --- you have all these opportunities and you're throwing it all away.
 (www.edition.cnn.com/2014/04/28/health/irpt-weight-loss-brian-flemming/)
- (14) 'There's you who celebrates Candlemas in a normal way, then there's them... [picture]
- (6) There's the establishment that hates me. (...) But there's the people who, them, have always been great to me.
- In common: establish in the discourse: oppositional **pair of referents** + oppositional properties
 - Difference: linguistic **encoding** of the property:
 new sentence (15) / implicit (14) / cleft relative clause (6)

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Existentials & *il y a* clefts + contrastive topic?

- These types of *il y a* clefts and existentials have the **same function in discourse**
- Question w.r.t. Information Structure:
should the pivot in the existential sentences be analyzed as a contrastive **topic** or as a contrastive **focus**?
 - In favor of topic:

Givenness: *eux* 'them' in (14): visually given, *you* in (15) mentioned in prior context (and what the article is about)
 - Against topic (in favor of focus?)

The comment about these topics is not expressed within the same sentence

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Implications for the Focus Marking Hypothesis

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Il y a as focus marking device?

NO rejection of Focus Marking hypothesis

- 1) **Corpus data** of *il y a* clefts:
 - 99% of tokens: clefted element = focus
 - 1% of tokens: clefted element = topic [+FOCUS]

=> Clefted element of *il y a* clefts **always bear a focus-feature**
- 2) Difficulty of construing a sentence with *il y a* + topic in a context **without any indication of contrast**
(cf. [15] about *the towels* and [16] following "*What about Klaus?*")

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Focus Marking Hypothesis

- Recall: two formulations of the Focus Marking Hypothesis
 - "The following constituent is **focal**" (Lambrecht 1994)
 - "The following constituent is **non-topical**" (Erteschik-Shir 2007)



VS.



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Focus Marking Hypothesis

- Recall: two formulations of the Focus Marking Hypothesis
 - “The following constituent is **focal**” (Lambrecht 1994)
 - “The following constituent is **non-topical**” (Erteschik-Shir 2007)



**ACHTUNG
FOCUS**

- Tokens with contrastive topic →
[+FOCUS] is what counts, not [–TOPIC]

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Independent confirmation: psycholinguistics

- Two comprehension studies that support the Focus Marking Hypothesis:
 - Besserman, Love & Shapiro** (2015), Besserman (2014)
 - Visual world paradigm
 - When English existential is used, people look at discourse-new referent
 - Grondelaers, Brysbaert, Speelman & Geeraerts** (2002)
 - Self-paced reading
 - Dutch ‘er’ = equivalent of English ‘there’, French ‘y’, syntactically optional
 - Insertion of ‘er’ speeds up reading when combined with unexpected NP, slows down reading when combined with expected NP
- // y a clefts / existentials vs. canonical subject–verb sentences?
to be continued....!

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4

Conclusion

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Conclusion

- // y a cleft articulations on a par with existentials

<i>all-focus</i>	<i>regular</i>
<i>focus-background</i>	<i>list-reading</i>
<i>contrastive topic-comment</i>	<i>contr. topic/focus</i>
- Focus Marking Hypothesis → topical constituents **unexpected**
- But: always (**contrastive**) topics with **focus-feature**
- Corpus analysis → **confirmation** of Focus Marking Hypothesis:
// y a (clefts/existentials) always introduce
a constituent with [+FOCUS] feature
(topics not excluded)

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Thank you!

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